THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Rejection

John M. Buchanan
April 9, 2000

"God is always sending us people to disturb us – to wake us up – because about the worst thing that can happen to us, religiously speaking, is for us to hold perfectly still without changing a thing until we become fossils.... God is all around us, speaking to us through the most unlikely people. Sometimes it is a mysterious stranger, but more often, I suspect, it is people so familiar to us that we simply overlook them – our own children and parents, our own friends and neighbors – all of those hometown prophets who challenge us and love us and tell us who we are."

Barbara Brown Taylor
Bread of Angels

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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REJECTION
April 9, 2000

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Isaiah 53: 1-6
Mark 6: 1-6

Dear God, we come here today to hear the word you have for us. We come to sit in silence together because the life we live is very noisy and busy and crowded and rushed. Many voices clamor for our attention, urging us to buy, travel, eat, drink. So silence in us for this hour any voice but your own and then startle us with the clarity of your truth, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

They are all gone now—the neighbors, the ones who knew me and who, in a manner of speaking, not only witnessed but participated in my coming of age. They bought raffle tickets for the Boy Scout Troop and tickets for the Elementary School Spring Festival. I was their paperboy, and in the winter they paid me money to shovel the snow from their walks.

At Halloween they knew who it was who threw dried corn at their windows or rang the bell and ran. I hit a baseball through Whetstines' front window one summer afternoon and Mr. Whetstine patiently taught me how to measure, purchase and install a glass window I paid for. They are all gone now: Esteps, Criders, Pattersons, Whetstines, Shaughnessys, Snyders, Glens. But it was important to me that when I returned with academic degrees from far away universities, with a new automobile in a neighborhood where no one ever had a brand new car, with a family of my own and a profession—"You're really a preacher? You actually did it?"—it was important that in some way they acknowledge and approve. I cannot imagine what it would have been like to return to disapproval. I cannot imagine the neighbors' rejection.

But that is precisely what happened to Jesus one day. He returned to his hometown and his neighbors rejected him. He had been enormously successful. He had healed and restored a mentally ill man, a feverish old woman, a paralytic, a woman with a twelve-year hemorrhage, a dead little girl. He had reached across the barriers and boundaries that divided his society into insiders and outsiders and welcomed the unwelcome, touched the untouchables, ate with the sinners. He had painted a picture of an alternate social vision called the Kingdom of God—and it was both stunning and disturbing to those who saw it. So everywhere he went there were huge crowds—pressing in on him. People were bringing their sick and elderly. All day long and into the evening they came, even followed along the lakeshore as he and his friends sailed from place to place in Peter's small boat. Everyone knew about him. Everyone was talking about him. Everyone had an opinion about him.

And now, for the first time since he left—since the day he walked away from the carpenter shop to be baptized by his cousin, John—now for the first time he came home, to Nazareth, his parent's village where Mary had been born and where Joseph had been the carpenter.

It's still there, of course, now a major city, in the news recently because of the Pope's visit but also because the small Christian community objected to plans to build a Muslim mosque near the Church of the Annunciation, on the spot where tradition says the angel Gabriel visited a young virgin with news of her miraculous conception.

It was a small village then, however, and everyone would have heard the news, the rumors, about him. They were his neighbors, the ones who had watched him as he grew, saw him playing with his friends, perhaps indulged him as he tried a few pranks, perhaps shared wisdom about this or that, watched silently as he went to the synagogue with Joseph, learned to read Hebrew, learned to say the prayers with the other men and boys, watched as he learned the trade and then practiced it, crafting bowls, spoons, chairs, tables, yoke for oxen.

That is who Jesus joined in the old synagogue on the first Sabbath of his homecoming. Was he glad to be there? I think so. Was he proud? Perhaps. Was he a little nervous when they asked him to read and interpret? Probably. Every minister has done it and knows how precarious it is. These people really know me.

When Jesus is handed the scroll to read and interpret, Mark tells it straight: "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom?" They are sarcastic questions, hurtful questions. "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" That's an odd way to identify him, by the way. Men are known by their father's name. Simon bar Jonah—Simon, son of Jonah. Jesus bar Joseph would have been his name. The only reason for using the construction "Mary's son" was if the father was not known. So this is a slur—the only contemporary equivalent of which would be "bastard."

They took offense at him, Mark says. And Jesus responds—not by arguing, not by being defensive—but by observing, "Prophets are not without honor except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

And then Mark remembers two chilling anecdotes: "he could do no deed of power there." Barbara Brown Taylor calls it Jesus' "un-miracle." Their unbelief, their preconceptions and expectations and biases, their unwillingness to be open to the power and presence of God in their old neighbor, the carpenter, apparently was effective. Nothing happened. Nothing changed. Nothing new emerged. Life returned to normal. And what I think is the most chilling verse in the Bible, "he went about among the villages teaching." That is, he left and he never came back to that synagogue.

One of the experiences that leaves its mark on our spirit is rejection. Writer friends have told me that receiving a rejection slip in the mail is the worst experience in the world; that after you've submitted your manuscript, the labor of your heart and mind and hands, your masterpiece, and receive notice that people don't like it, appreciate it, want it, you go through a kind of personal spiritual crisis. You even learn to recognize rejection letter envelopes and leave them unopened.

Amy Dickinson, writing in *Time Magazine* last week observes that "of all the memorable humiliations of youth, none are more potent than the one that comes in a skinny envelope one day during your senior year in high school." It is a rejection letter from the college of your choice. Acceptance letters come in fat envelopes. Dickinson's article is written to advise parents in helping their youngsters through the experience of rejection.

Mark mentions Jesus' family in Nazareth, names four brothers—James, Joses, Judas and Simon, and alludes to sisters as well.

Part of what a family is for is to help individuals deal with rejection. The late Ross Snyder, who was a pioneer in family therapy at Chicago Theological Seminary used to say that a family is where you know you will never be turned away; where you will always have a place. A family, he used to say, your family, is the group of people you can count on being on your side, for you. Sometimes, Snyder taught, we have to find other families when our own doesn't work. Sometimes, at its very best, Snyder proposed, the Christian Church is a family for us all.

And sometimes it does work, at home, the way it is supposed to. Mel White, an evangelical pastor, professor at Fuller Seminary, author, consultant and writer for Jerry Falwell, husband and father, after years of struggle, announced that he was gay, that he was leaving his marriage and profession.

Rejection is a mild word for what happened to him. Former colleagues would not speak or return calls. He was picketed, called names, publicly berated and told that he should be stoned to death, that he would die of AIDS—God's special punishment, that whatever else happened to him, he was going to spend eternity in hell. A friend, an evangelical theologian and writer, Phil Yancey, decided to stay with him. Yancey himself came under fire, received a letter that said if he didn't stop defending Mel White he would "thankfully receive what you deserve, an eternity in hell." Yancey, who is a very gracious man with a wonderful sense of humor, replied to ask if the writer really meant "thankfully," and he wrote back saying he did.

In the middle of it all, White's parents were caught by a TV interviewer who asked, on camera, "You know what other Christians are saying about your son. They say he's an abomination. What do you think of that?" "Well," the mother answered in a sweet, quivery voice, "he may be an abomination, but he's still our pride and joy." (Phillip Yancey, *What's Amazing About Grace?* P.161-171)

Sometimes the best antidote to rejection is a family that knows how to be a family.

Part of what is going on in Mark's presentation of the story of Jesus is that outsiders become insiders, and people who should be insiders become outsiders. The rejects, the marginal, the ones religious and social custom call unclean, are the very ones who Jesus invites to table. And the real insiders, Pharisees, scribes, religious officials, are the ones who don't get it, won't understand, won't budge, won't leave the safety of their rules, regulations, assumptions and preconceptions in order to entertain a new idea.

The most devout, the most committed, the most pious, are the very ones who hound him, question him, accuse him, berate him, oppose him and who will ultimately kill him. There is an obvious warning here—not to the overt sinners of this world, but to people of faith. The faith community, Barbara Brown Taylor says, proved to be Jesus' toughest audience. And the warning to the church today is contained in that deceptively simple but devastating conclusion.

He moved on. He left. He didn't have time to waste on people so certain of themselves, so rigid, so arrogantly exclusive that they could not hear, let alone believe, the good news of God's unconditional love.

But even that is not the main point here, I think. One of the reasons they rejected Jesus was their own rigid religiosity. But the other reason was that he was just Jesus, the carpenter, Mary's maybe illegitimate son. He didn't look like a Messiah, certainly didn't act like the Messiah they were waiting for who would come in power and might, and drive the Romans out and restore the Temple. He didn't look like or sound like a Word from God. He was just Jesus, an ordinary man, their old neighbor. Jesus does not—cannot—force them to believe in him or love one another, and so nothing new happens, no miracles, new birth, no Kingdom of God.

The good folk of Nazareth, in order to get it, are going to have to change the way they think; live a lot more loosely with their traditions and be open to the new, the unique, the novel, as it comes to them in the ordinary, the everyday, the commonplace.

How easy it is to miss goodness and beauty and truth—because we think we already know where and how to find it. How easy it was to overlook him.

Martha Beck has written a book, *Expecting Adam: a True Story of Birth, Rebirth and Everyday Magic* about the birth of her son, a little boy with Down Syndrome. The Beck's Harvard colleagues advised them to terminate the pregnancy because of the hindrance the child would be to their academic career. But Adam was born and has changed the way his parents see the world, see life.

Beck tells about coming to terms with Adam's difficulty in speaking which was frustrating to him and heart breaking to her.

At a particularly low point she was in the grocery store with both children and told them they could each pick out a treat at the candy counter. Katie chose Lifesavers and a chocolate bar. But Adam went to a basket of red rosebuds and picked one out.

His mother put it back and said, "No, honey, this isn't candy—don't you want candy?" Adam shook his small head and picked the rosebud out again and placed it on the counter. At home the incident was forgotten.

But the next morning, there Adam was in her bedroom, with the rosebud in a small vase.

Martha Beck writes: "I looked at him in surprise. I didn't realize that he knew what vases were for, let alone how to get one down from the cupboard, fill it with water, and put a flower in it.

"Adam walked over to the bed and handed the rose to me. As he held it out, he said in a clear, loud voice, 'Here.'" (Reviewed and Excerpted in *The Christian Century,* 4/5/2000, *Supernatural Beings, by Kathleen Housley)*

Sometimes goodness and beauty and truth come to us in unexpected and ordinary ways. Sometimes people close to us—children, parents, teachers, students, tutors, husbands, wives, lovers and friends—convey the truth and grace of God and God's love in Jesus Christ.

He will be rejected, not only on this day when he read and spoke in the synagogue in his hometown, Nazareth, but soon, officially, dramatically, definitively, by his religion and by the Roman governing authorities, by scribes and Pharisees and Priests and by common people caught up in a public spectacle. He will die alone soon, publicly humiliated.

He will give new meaning to ancient words written by one of his people centuries earlier—

> "He was despised and rejected by others: A man of suffering and acquainted with (grief) infirmity." (Isaiah 53:3)

It is the deepest mystery of our faith that something of God's love was expressed ultimately in this event of his rejection and crucifixion.

It is the deepest mystery of our faith that in his rejection we behold God's deepest commitment to us and love for us, and the promise that whatever else happens to us, whatever rejections scar our hearts and mark our spirits, we are forever welcome and safe in God's strong love.

"Surely," the ancient prophet said, "he has borne our infirmities he was wounded for our transgressions and by his bruises—by his rejection—we are healed."

All praise to him. Amen.

Prayers of the People
April 9, 2000
The Reverend Carol J. Allen

Holy God, someone has said that we "swim in your grace like a whale in the ocean" (West Africa, source unknown). You surround and support all living things. Like surging waves, your providence buoys us up. Your spirit is awash in this place, cleansing hearts and minds with your power to save. When life shipwrecks us, you offer your very self in the household of your church as a place to stand until we get our bearings again. All praise and thanks to you, our gracious Lord and God.

In these few moments of time for ourselves, God, we are free to acknowledge that a multitude of pressures push in on us. A multitude of voices clang and clamor for our attention. We hear the "claims of business, the attractions of pleasure," and the cares and demands of getting on in this world (Glen Rainsley). These pressures, these voices, these claims numb us to your claims on us. When we are separated from you, we are separated from our best self. We become subject to fears about our future, slave to the desire for the praise of others. In our separation from self and you, we take the easy way, not the right way.

God of our liberation, the world can be a harsh and cruel place. The world that you love requires our best. Thank you for Jesus who goes before us to show the way. He resisted the forces that would leave him useless and passive. He lived out the claims of your gift of faith. He drove out demons, healed sick people, and raised those as good as dead onto life giving paths. When it cost him his life, thanks be to you, O God, for raising him to new life, that we might have another chance to love and serve you.

Redeeming God, through the witness of your church, may the young who search for meaning and purpose in ways that lead to addiction and not constructive work, be saved. May those who are grieving be comforted and filled with hope; those facing terminal illness or long bouts with lingering diseases be confirmed in the value of their existence; those offering risky and true peace-making leadership on local and global levels see some good results. Use your church to feed the hungry, house the homeless, open up the power of self development and self offering, in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught his disciples to say when they pray, "OUR FATHER..." Amen.